



# **A NATIONAL THEATRE FOR INDIA**



# A NATIONAL THEATRE FOR INDIA

BY  
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**By the same Author**

*Verse*

BEAUTY'S SANCTUARY  
MOUNTAINS  
SYMPHONY OF PEACE  
COMES EVER THE DAWN  
VOICELESS LYRES

*Essays*

WRIT IN SAND

*Plays*

THE AWAKENING  
FOR HEAVEN IS HERE (*in preparation*)



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**A NATIONAL THEATRE :**

**WANTED :** A non-commercial theatre—Endowment—Site—Board of Trustees—Staff and actor—dramatic school—Equipment—Language and 'national' defined — Puppet and Village theatres — The Childrens' Theatre—Functions—Drama Prizes —The scheme is practical.

Presented from: -

Prof. Dr. J. C. Jain and  
Smt. Komalshri Jain to  
Prakrit Bharati Academy.





## THE SOUL OF INDIA

Here and there we see in the darkness  
Starlike, flickering points of flame,  
Souls aglow with immortal radiance,  
Threading their way through the mortal night.

Far above the guttering candles  
Of popular favour, and earthly fame,  
That burden vision with tallowy smoke,  
And smother ideals in tarnished light.

These are the rulers unacknowledged,  
The royal few of the blood and the race,  
Who leave unclaimed the stage and the limelight  
Notoriety, fashion, applause.

Silently working out the thoughts  
That the world has never the courage to face,  
Unconcerned for justification,  
Looking for consequence less than cause

Others may talk but they are doers;  
They must be thinking while others dream,  
Into the darkest way of knowledge  
They bear a stamp that shall never go out

Through ice and fire of all experience,  
Laughing and scarred they go with the stream,  
Fearlessly down to the burning whirlpool  
Of final truth and ultimate doubt.

Ring after ring of the vortex floats them  
Over consecutive pools of life,  
Plunged and stunned in sorrowful eddies,  
Tossed in an edge of rapturous foam.

So fate hurries them deeper and deeper  
In vital circles where they may learn,  
The needful teaching of all adventure,  
Every pang and every thrill.

Till they fade at last in the hidden core,  
The axis whereon the whole must turn,  
The focus poised by absolute forces,  
Holding reality tense and still.

The people will have the theatre ; then make it a good one .The theatre is irresistible ; organise the theatre ”

MATTHEW ARNOLD

\* \* \*

The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,  
For we that live to please, must please to live

DRYDEN

\* \* \*

The public can't be blamed for the rottenness of our theatres The public are always and everywhere the same ; intelligent and silly, kind and cruel—according to mood. It always was a flock which needs good shepherds and dogs, and has always gone where the dogs and shepherds drove it.

CHEKOV

\* \* \*

“The Theatre should be a factory of thought, a prompter of Conscience, an elucidator of social conduct an armoury against despair and dulness, and a temple of the ascent of Man.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

\* \* \*

Man is God in ruins

EMERSON



# INTRODUCTORY

## THE NECESSITY OF DRAMA

The drama arose out of fundamental human needs in the dawn of civilisation and has continued to express them for thousands of years. It represents humanity in moments of maximum tension, conflict and crisis, and it tries to resolve the conflicts in broadly human terms. Out of the word, dance, music, and the plastic arts it builds one mighty synthesis of humanity's creative faculties. Its manifold forms embrace diverse conventions of theatre and it pulsates in pantomime and recitation, in the relatively separate arts of the ballet, oratorio and opera, and in the newest products of mechanical progress, the films and broadcasting. It is the greatest collective enterprise that projects and interprets our common humanity.

This is true even today when drama has fallen upon evil days in harassed countries like India where the material conditions of production seriously hamper the dramatist's creative spirit.

There has never been a time when men of letters were able to practise their trade in complete security, peace and freedom from want. Mankind and its artists have had to endure greatly. It is, in truth, from this dynamic nature of man's collective, as well as private life, that a great art like the drama has gathered its impetus and derived its content, meaning and value to humanity

The drama has been partial to the reconciliation of warring principles, the resolution of antagonisms. Even this art of conflicts and crises is, after all, an attempt to make man at home in an alien universe, to salve his wounds, and to pacify him. To a world that is sadly in need of pacification and balm, art is the perfect comforter, bringing reconciliation and even escape from the intolerable importunities of present fact.

Much of the humanism of the drama and the stage comes from this effort; as also much of its aesthetic nature, which is a matter of balance, order and repose. If man is constantly warring against himself and his kind, he is also ceaselessly trying for appeasement. Reconciliation, synthesis and unity provide a major part of the aesthetic and intellectual gratification in the Great Attic and Elizabethan drama.\*

In its greatest periods the theatre has been completely democratic, for it succeeds best when it is perfect enough to induce a common reaction among the spectators, to forge a common soul. Great drama is not built upon an ignoble theme, nor is public affection sustained by it. Tremendous drama and petty trifles are not to be reconciled. A living theatre cannot be built upon emotional shreds and patches. There should be an affirmation of a belief in life; human dignity and nobility must be raised to a status superior to the trappings whereby it is surrounded.

The theatre is more than a centre of idle amusement. It is an instrument for projecting the human soul into space in such a way that all who see it are

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\* J. Gasner—'Greek Drama' (Introduction)

initiated into its eternal truths. This way of imitation need not be difficult, irksome or dull. If taken through the play-spirit which resides in every human being it might easily be filled with gaiety and laughter. Then the theatre, stripped bare to its simplest terms, becomes a playground. The drama is like mankind. sublime and ridiculous, exalted and frivolous. The stage can be, and often is, today perhaps more than ever before, guilty of inexcusable banality and meretricious sensationalism. This, with a war on, and with our minds not a little warped by the turn of events, is to be expected, for mankind is suffering one of its periodic catastrophes. But drama cannot be suppressed for long; and while, in these days, the problem of nourishment is uppermost and we have passed through in Bengal a disaster of the greatest magnitude, another form of nourishment of an emotional kind is required, or else the theatre may wilt in a general drought.

## **GREEK DRAMA AND AFTER**

Greek tragedy is one of the supremest achievements in literature, and it was studied by the most authoritative of critics, Aristotle. The 'old' comedy is represented by Aristophanes who offers an extraordinary medley of poetry, journalistic virulence and comic verve. The 'new' comedy has perished but its indirect influence through Plautus and Terence was great.

Between the downfall of Pagan culture and the first clear manifestations of modern literature, five hundred years elapsed. The mediæval drama was not a continuation of the Graeco-Roman drama, but



evolved out of religious festivals The dramas founded on the Christian Gospels and known as Mystery plays were disappointing and by the Reformation lost their vitality The Miracles lasted longer, and survived in Spain in the 'Golden Century'—the seventeenth The Moralities were allegories in which the characters were abstractions, "Everyman" is the best known. The mediæval farce arose from the spirit of fun and satire It is a rudimentary and vigorous *genre*, practised by Shakespeare and Molière and very much alive today

With the renaissance, tragedy and comedy were revived and the influence of Seneca in Italy and France was great. England and France retained their independence. The Elizabethan stage, by far the greatest, was little known for a century. Italy brought a comedy of rascality, the *commedia 'dell' arte*, with its conventional characters and costumes : from Spain came dramas of extravagant adventure ; in France Senecan tragedy was brought to perfection by Corneille and Racine. In particular Molière's many-sided activity demands mention ; especially his comedies of manners and character.

With Shakespeare, Racine, Molière, the drama was fully formed. The eighteenth century created nothing special. The most evident change was social rather than literary ; tearful and domestic comedy were the kinds created. The problem play is not the creation of Ibsen or even of the nineteenth century, Molière, Voltaire, Diderot ; Beaumarchais had discussed social, moral and political theses on the stage Many romantic dramas had a problem element. Perhaps the most original development in the twentieth century is the fantasy with a philosophical background.

Luigi Pirandello, Ferenc Molnár, J. M. Barrie, G. B. Shaw, Karel Capek, Eugene O'Neill offer a veritable museum of all possible kinds of techniques.

## MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

Modern drama exhibits a great variety of forms and themes. This is partly due to the progress in the mechanical resources of the theatre, progress so great that the drama may be said truly to represent a synthesis of the arts. Modern playwrights have shown a never-ceasing quest for newer ways of expressing the experience of living. We had realism in Ibsen's "The Wild Duck," naturalism in Hauptmann's "Weavers". O'Casey's "Juno and the Paycock", symbolism in Maeterlinck's "Pelleas and Mélisande" expressionism and fantasy in Molnár's "Liliom", folk drama in Bihram's "Abraham's Bosom's" and the psychoanalytical play in Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author". It is Maxwell Anderson's conviction that if the modern theatre is ever to approach the greatness of the Elizabethan, plays will have to be written in verse. The notable success of his "Winterset" and the fair successes of T. S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral", Auden's "The Ascent of F-6" and Spender's "The Trial of a Judge" seem to prove that the audience of today does not find verse a hindrance.

Since the chief concern of the dramatist is the creation of beauty rather than the posing of problems, it would seem that the hope of the drama of the future centres round the poet dramatist (only in a very limited way in India) with his imaginative approach to life, and his command of beautiful speech.

## SANSKRIT DRAMA\*

The ancients saw a living theatre growing out of ritual. The anthropomorphic process by means of which natural forces and divinities can become *dramatis personae*, began as early as 1000 B. C. Legend sanctified the drama by attributing it to the desire of Indra, who requested a dramatic spectacle of Brahma and was granted his wish in the form of Natya Veda, or the Veda of drama. This fifth Veda was merely a compilation from others. From the Rig Veda Brahma took the words from the Sama Veda. music; Yajur Veda gave gesture and expression, and finally from the Atharva Veda came flavour. The sage Bharata is the legendary author of "Natya Shastra", a treatise on dramatic art. The commentators constantly cite his sutras or aphorisms. By the 10th century dramatic criticism had reached an advanced point and the "Dasha Rupa" distinctly defines the ten main forms of drama. Other critical works followed exhibiting a range of sub-division unsurpassed by the efforts of Eastern theorists, ancient or modern.

## INDIAN DRAMATIC ART

The true character and significance of dramatic art is explained by Brahma to the Danavas :

"This play is not merely for your pleasure or the pleasure of the Devas, but exhibits mood for all the Three Worlds. I made this play as following the movement of the world, whether in work or play, profit, peace, laughter, battle, lust, or slaughter; yielding the fruit of righteousness to those who follow the moral law, pleasure to those who follow lust, a restraint for the

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\* The Sanskrit Theatre Dr. De.

unruly, a discipline for the followers of a rule, creating vigour in the impotent, zeal in warriors, wisdom in the ignorant, learning in scholars, affording sport to kings, endurance to the sorrow-smitten, profit to those who seek advantage, courage to the broken-willed; replete with the diverse moods, informed with the varying passions of the soul, linked to the deeds of all mankind, the best, the middling, and the low, affording excellent counsel, pastime, weal and all else

“This drama shall be the source of all counsel in matters of flavour, mood, and every rite, it shall serve as a timely resting-place for those who are grieved, weary, unhappy. or engaged in an arduous discipline; bestowing righteousness, renown, long life, fortune, increase of reason; affording counsel to the world That which is not to be found herein is not knowledge, nor craft, nor wisdom, nor any art, nor deeds, nor Union (yoga).

“I made this drama according to the Seven Lands, and so you should not feel resentment towards the Immortals. The drama is to be understood as witnessing the deeds of Gods and Titans, kings of spheres, and Brahma-sages. Drama is that which accords with the order of the world, with its weal and woe, and it consists in the movement of the body and other arts of expression. The theatre is such as to afford a means of entertainment in the world, and a place of audience for the Vedas, for philosophy, for history, and other matters”

Bharata, referring to the art of the theatre, said that this should be studied, under thorough discipline, and not impulsively; for the stage-actor can, only by

virtue of conscious discipline, reach perfection. The Indian dance is a deliberate art in which action is the prime thing. 'The amateur does not exist in Oriental art.' . . . 'The perfect actor has the same complete and calm command of gesture that the puppet showman has over the movements of the puppets ; the exhibition of his art is altogether independent of his own emotional condition, and if he is moved by what he represents, he is moved as a spectator and not as an actor. Excellent acting wears the air of perfect spontaneity, but that is the art which conceals art'.\* Indian acting is a poetic art, an interpretation of life, while modern European acting, apart from any question of the words is prose, or imitation. Today this form survives only in the dance. Historically it began much as the Greek theatre. The Ramayana was recited, later aided by music and gesture.

Nothing is known about the drama before 200 A. D. One only knows about its glory, decline and decay.

Fragments of three, Buddhist plays written by Asvaghosha in the second century reveal marked development.

The great age of Sanskrit Drama began in the reign of Vikramaditya who inaugurated an epoch of cultural development never again approached in this country which fell foul to a host of conquerors. At his court in Ujjain lived India's 'Nine Gems,' the ablest exponents of art, music and painting. Kalidasa's "Shakuntala" and "Vikramorvasi" belong to this period and are both plays of incomparable loveliness. Goethe was so enthralled by the former that he exclaimed enraptured :

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\* 'The Mirror of Gesture' by Ananda Coomaraswami.

Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline,  
And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, fasted, fed  
Wouldst thou the earth and Heaven itself in one sole name combine?  
I name thee, O Shakuntala, and all at once is said.

Not far removed from Kalidasa in point of time is Shudraka the author of "The Little Clay Cart". Other great plays were those of Bhavabhuti who took his themes from the Ramayana. In the eighth Century Bhatta Narayan dramatised stories from the Mahabharata though the Ramayana has proved to be a more inspiring source. There are only two outstanding plays with themes outside the epics. Kalidasa's "Malavika and Agnimitra" and "Mudrarakshasa" by Vishakhadatta. In the 12th century Krishna-mishra wrote "Prabodha-chandrodaya", an eulogy of Vedantic philosophy.

In the fifteenth century we have the one-act *Prahasanas* of which a typical example is "Dhurta-samagama". But the drama from the thirteenth century onwards was under a dark cloud. Signs of revival came from the north. The Mediaeval drama is mostly of the Rasa, Rama or Krishna Lila variety, inspired by the worship of Rama and Krishna. These dramatic representations in the yatras migrated from the temple to the Village Theatres. The theatre became a mass theatre, a theatre of the people. The popularity of such plays though dim is still to be felt.

In the sixteenth century Chaitanya encouraged the drama for the sake of its vast educational possibilities. Rupa Goswami, a disciple of his, by staging the master's life contributed to the Bengal stage.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN DRAMA**

In the Greek drama conflict is the cardinal note, in Sanskrit drama peace and stillness are sought after

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\* *The Story of Brahma* J C Cousins

The latter bears far more resemblance to Elizabethan drama than to the drama of the Greeks. In Western tragedy the 'rest is always silence' and we are rewarded with "the calm of mind, all passion spent." The Indian drama is based upon religious beliefs which accept the Law of Karma and the attitude in which there is complete cessation of conflict, in which man is too elevated, and in the non-presentation of agonising spectacle. The distinctive excellence of Indian Drama is to be sought in the poetic robe which envelops it. It wears the wreaths of idyllic fancies in an unbroken chain of ever fresh beauties from an inexhaustible garden. Under the cloak of a romantic atmosphere always is to be found a moral intent and purpose : for virtue (and it should undergo travails without number) must triumph. It was a rich feast for eyes and ears, with plays designed to be seen and read. An optimistic outlook, naturally prevalent at the luxurious court, favoured romantic material, artificial plots and a happy conclusion. The writers fluttered pleasantly and wittily over the surface of life while the under-current remained inarticulate. It was a theatre of artifice, classical in form and romantic in spirit. The civilisation was primitive, credulous, rigid. The picturesque theatre was part of the Emperor's palace, built of wood and bricks. The stage was democratic in the sense that there were four pillars in the building, each different in colour, representing the four different castes, implying that all four were to be found there. The theatre could seat about a thousand people and the colourful costumes were specially noticeable, these were to be found alike on the stage and among the audience.

Performed on a simple platform in the hall or courtyard of the royal palace amidst sumptuous hangings and impressive architecture, the play made no pretence to realism. Female roles were generally assigned to women, there being no prohibition against actresses, though it is to be admitted that they were not looked upon with much favour in social circles.

Most of the dramatists were content to sport on the foam of life with charm, if not without some of the irony generally picked up in polite society; the plays are well spiced with descriptive poetry and the comedies are the rich amalgam of the resources of courtly playwrights who make artificial look natural and natural look artificial. Judged by modern standards the Sanskrit play is like a poetic drama, a combination of spectacle, lyrical inaction and music.

## MODERN DRAMA

We have had only two really outstanding dramatists in the last fifty years, Dwijendralal Ray and Rabindranath Tagore, both from Bengal. The reason why Bengali drama, more than perhaps any other is so spiritually mature is due to its very valuable and unshakable literary traditions. There has seldom been, therefore, a wholesale imitation of Western models; the charm and quality so typically its own has been long preserved. The drama is to a large measure national, free not only from the clutches of Sanskrit drama but also of foreign models. It is, in the words of Dr. Guha-Thakurta, intensely modern, in the sense that it represents the life and thought of today. In many of his best plays, "Shah Jahan" and "Nur Jahan" in particular, Dwijendralal creates an atmos-



phere and remarkable characters. In Tagore we are introduced into a world of spirit. He presents to us a cascade of musical emotion, lyricism, an absence of action, the breaking in of songs at unexpected moments and a philosophic spirit. Tagore is not dealing with ordinary people and 'is continually sacrificing the probable to the picturesque.' It is fortunate that in Bengal dramatists have drawn on the real and not the trivial problems of life. Dwijendralal and Tagore have taken their material from heroic legends and mythology "They have touched contemporary life" with such a depth of idealism that its subjective elements have completely overshadowed the objective realities.<sup>2</sup>

But the technique of the theatre ties the dramatist more closely to his own age and consequently to realism in the widest sense. It is not a photographic picture of the age but a complex expression which is nevertheless bound by a definite relation to the economic and social conditions.

Modern drama in Northern India is living in the shadow of European precept and example and the years illustrate the more perfectly the habitual dependence of Indian dramatists on European models. After Shakespeare the most influential figure has been Ibsen, the creator of the drama of ideas, a type which Shaw later cultivated so assiduously and so successfully. The first of the realists, he exhibited also romantic and symbolic tendencies; to him may be traced many of the dramatic movements of the present time. The so-called thesis play has, with modifications, been used very largely by modern playwrights, most

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\* Dr. Guha-Thakurta in "The Bengali Theatre" Another valuable work: The Indian Theatre by Y yunk

of whose efforts have been lately directed towards Broadcasting.

The broadcast play, like the cinema-scenario, is developing its own technique of construction. It can produce, through the unlimited devices at its command, a tremendous effect; this is primarily auricular; a host of wonderful images are conjured up and the imagination is aroused to a boundless pitch.

For one form of dramatic expression, more than for any other, broadcasting has done so much. I refer to oratory. It was thought that the printing press would reduce the importance of the spoken word; modern technique has altered conditions again, and now, the living voice has recovered much of its ancient power. The radio may be most effectively used for the purposes of training the voice for those who care to learn and apply themselves diligently. A people could be trained, while communing in mighty emotions, to detect, resent and resist the least trace of bathos.

## **THEATRE AND AUDIENCE**

The Elizabethan theatre was a place of entertainment and instruction to all sorts of people. The whole renaissance spirit was found in the plays of the time—eagerness to discover new philosophies as well as new lands, curiosity about the custom of foreign countries, and the behaviour of mankind under every sort of condition. The theatre was, as it has never been, a national theatre; it was open to and catered for a wide public.

The Elizabethans went to the theatre boisterously, with little care or consideration for dramatist or actor, the fops and beaux aiming at conspicuous attendance,

the groundlings offering vociferous approval at every opportunity. It was a strange audience: idlers, low women, travellers, fighters, students, poets, dandies and noblemen. To this queer mixture of cultured and educated, of those who came to listen to poetry and those who came to display their finery, the Elizabethan drama was shaped. One of the reasons for this popularity of the drama then was that the common man spoke the language of Shakespeare; the very laws were written in seemly and understandable prose. The common man was animated by the spirit which animated Shakespeare. Overwrought remains of this are to be found in the common speech in the plays of Synge.

“The theatre is not a political platform but a play must, in some form, be a criticism of life and this criticism and analysis must form its fundamental basis. Ben Jonson said:

Scourge those apes,  
And to those courteous eyes oppose a mirror,  
As large as is the stage wherein we act,  
Where they shall see the time's deformity  
Anatomised in every nerve and sinew  
With constant courage and contempt of fear.

The people no longer obtain the same spiritual food from the theatre. ‘It has ceased to be a popular art, in the sense of having the heart of the people in it and with it.’ It has become pure show, pure entertainment, in which the people have scarcely a part at all. And just as technically the stage has been removed further away from the audience, and its illusory character emphasised by distance and by artificial lighting, so in reality it has moved away from the life of the

audience, and has come to be regarded simply as an escape from the values of real life. The nineteenth century brought vaudeville and melodrama but the period was unsuited for its development and growth and the soil was not well prepared for rich mental harvest.

It is true that the fortunes of the theatre depend upon the audience who attends it. A small audience cannot do much, nor can a band of artists unaided by the public, for the theatre is the most popular of the arts, and reflects the atmosphere of the spectators. It is natural, therefore, that the average audience is really responsible for the state in which the theatre now finds itself. And what is the audience, especially the moneyed class, like? Uninformed, uncritical, dull. And such people are the ones to be found in the large cities. These people are busy, forever busy, busy about money, about eating, about going somewhere else, about buying, about disordered killing and safe dying, about laughing, governing, selling, health and sleeping, busy in a mild, somnambulistic way.

They move round the external circle of life with acquiescent unreal movements. From within, they lean against each other in reciprocal hypnosis of despair.

## **STAGE AND SCREEN**

On the Continent the theatre was an absolute necessity of life. People demanded their theatres, just as they demanded reforms. Not until a National Theatre is demanded by the community or unless some far-sighted philanthropist sees in it a thing of inestimable importance, will anything come about. What

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\* Cf. A. Nicoll & Elizabeth Drew.

good are plays without a theatre? The drama achieves its fulfilment only when acted, a spoken word is an essential element in a great and vital theatre. The only country today in which the theatre is part of the life-blood of the nation is Russia. We, in India, though it has been atrophied through disuse, love the theatre. Pure and simple amusement is now taken to be the only criterion of any performance, and American films have done much to foster this interest, since in the cinema no collaboration of the audience is needed at all. People can sit back in their comfortable seats and absorb all the projected symbols of their daydreams. How easy it is to please and pander to the lowest taste! 'The popular cinema' someone said, 'does not only cater for imbeciles, but breeds them.' It satisfies all the frustrated whims, fancies, desires and appetites of men and women throughout the world. Georges Duhamel called the commercial cinema 'this terrible machine for stupefying and destroying the mind.'

The world's cinema audience, according to John Gierson, was 250 millions a week (in 1937). When the aim is to please the largest number of people art and public service must take second place. The film people are businessmen and their chief concern is to ensure the rattle of lakhs of rupees or the crinkle of as many notes.

Doubtless there is technical skill, and superb craftsmanship but one thing alone matters, gain and profit. It must succeed at once, must be immediately popular. The commercial cinema has one aim - it can therefore, be either absorbed or eliminated. It does not, because it cannot, aim at exploiting the artist's creative spirit

for the sake of the individual. The scenario-writer has to subject himself to such pruning and drastic culling that his original creation is driven out of shape and recognition. An epic poem may come to fruition with the simple aid of pencil and paper : a film needs a fortune and a trained and conscientious army of writers and technicians. Unfortunately, the magnitude of the effort involved is no measure of artistic, or, indeed, of entertainment value. The world's cinema audience may be addressed only through the gold-plated convolutions of Big Business. Today the American films represent an attempt to escape from the horrors of war into a philosophy of simple kindness by means simply Wordsworthian. They present us with a picture of America that is sentimental and little else besides, but with strong intimations of immortality. Yet they offer in the film of propaganda-cum-entertainment, an escape from effort as well as horror. As a refuge from the war-weary spirit they present nation-wide goodness with barbarism rampant only beyond the national boundaries. British films have a far more realistic approach and make a strong argument for the film industry as a means of national projection suited to national needs. It must, however, be admitted, in defence of Indian films (with all their inadequacy of technique) that, the moral note predominating, they do not descend to that depth of depravity which American films, with a note of distraction, are so capable of. In fact, the very talented actress, Devika Rani, who has the interest of the drama at heart, is striving to make the films higher in artistic value, and also more akin to national needs.

Has the Cinema killed the theatre? This is a question so many ask.

Another : Does not the cinema, because of its range and potentialities, outdistance the theatre ?

It is no use weeping anticipatory tears over the supposed corpse of the stage ; the theatre has preserved its vitality even in the most trying times. In some form or the other it has always existed in England and in India. The cinema and the theatre have separate functions to perform and the sooner this is realised the better. The cinema quickens the dramatic sense of the spectator without being completely able to satisfy his dramatic needs. In the cinema at best the eyes are following an entrancing photograph of elaborately, delicately and subtly conceived situations. The legitimate actor, no matter what great strides the cinema makes, will hold his own. Whether the films are made stereoscopic and polychrome, whether they are synchronised with photography or wireless telegraphy, the stage actor will impress more because his emotional art possesses a freshness of an original momentary creation, while the art of photography reproduces an emotional impression at some time past. The cinema is good for the combination of subjective and objective approaches, 'where individualisation takes the place of type characterisation,' for the faithful imitation of reality and for the utterly Walt Disney-like animated figures technique. One of the essential differences between the two is the magic of 'flesh and blood' in the theatre. The film is an established creation which is immutable, 'a theatrical performance is in the process of dying as it is born,' and no two performances can

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\* Cf A. Nicoll.

ever be alike. There is tremendous contact, almost mystical, between performers and audience, and a performance may be completely ruined by an unresponsive audience.

The realm of the theatre is the rediscovery of convention : in a deliberate throwing over of all thoughts concerning naturalistic illusion, in an embracing of that universalising power which so closely belongs to dramatic form when rightly exercised, and in restoring verse dialogue which removes the action from the commonplace of daily existence. The screen stands for the individual and the stage for humanity—Clifford Odets understood this well. He says, "My interest was not in the presentation of the problem of an individual, but in that of a whole class." In other words, the task was to find a theatrical form with which to express the mass as hero. In England and America there has been a return to poetic drama and it is clear that for English Drama true hope lies there.

The cinema possesses such a hold over the world of reality and can achieve expression so vitally in terms of ordinary life that the realistic play must appear stale, flat, unconsequential. One must have the idea that the theatre is an institution belonging to the people. It once grew out of their inner need and must now return to its original purpose. It is an instrument for an expression of themselves, their memories, their present lives and their past, present and future aspirations. It is a playground wherein they may recreate themselves and their surroundings and their occupations. And in so doing unfold towards the heights. The future of the Indian theatre belongs to the soul of the Indian people and to those who know how to



reach this soul by spiritual rather than by mechanistic means

## AMATEUR THEATRES

In the amateur field, we in India have learnt something from the various movements in England and America. These have shown a noticeable decrease in the number of trivial works produced in favour of serious plays. Amongst the best known of these groups are The Group Theatre, The Theatre Guild, The Left Theatre and even The Arts Theatre. In some ways The Festival Theatre at Cambridge was a similar effort.

None of these were movements with a conscious effort to revolutionise drama or to pursue 'pure art.' The real motive force lay in the desire for art in any of its forms to be real, not necessarily in a naturalistic sense, but in the sense that it bears an actual relevance to contemporary life. Actually the Old Vic alone has been able to conform to a definite policy whether of progressive art, revival of classics, or experimental plays; for where the company is permanent and has an opportunity to work together the play can be regarded as an artistic whole instead of a collection of cameo parts.

The theatre is essentially a popular art; as a plaything of a coterie it is meaningless, and in England it has not been popular, except on the musical comedy side, since the days of Elizabeth. The theatre can be one of the most artistic weapons in a period of social change and conflict and if something can be achieved in India on a permanent basis the step will be a far-reaching one. Mr. K. M. Munshi, the well-known

author, told me not long ago that in his opinion the best method for the regeneration of drama in this country would be for a band of young enthusiasts to get together and secure a theatre wherein many plays of contemporary value may be produced. To have a group of young actors willing to experiment boldly in new theatrical forms is a virtue in itself. But it can only be of real value if it combines an excellence of content and has a permanent set of players. Moreover, it is more likely than not to remain a society interested in art and form only for the sake of art and hence it will remain ineffectual and only obtain an audience which, although it may be exclusive and intelligent, will be very small.

The Stratford Festival offers a unique example, for it possesses a modern building, a permanent endowment (subscribed to a large extent by Americans) and independence of commercial considerations.

It is the nearest thing to a National Theatre England can show. It has something of an international character by reason of the ceremonial associated with Shakespeare's birthday, when representatives of foreign nations unfurl their flags in the market-place, and walk in procession to lay flowers on the poet's grave. Stratford has the artistic advantage of having no 'star' system; leading actors may take a small part one evening and a big part the next.

It has been too often asserted that we in India are not drama-conscious and that state of mind whenever it comes, will of its own bring forth a harvest of plays and a crop of theatres. This we know to be impossible, for there cannot come such a time unless we of our own make some effort to that end. We were not at

one time cinema or radio-conscious. But I have every reason to believe that thousands would feel it as an acute personal loss if by some mischance the cinema or the radio were to be taken away from our midst.

Amateur theatricals alone have been responsible for keeping drama alive in India these days, and in various parts of the country circles have been formed. Most of the plays produced are either plays in English or translations of well-known European playwrights. It is not my purpose to minimise the work done by various Amateur Dramatic Clubs but it is necessary to put everything in its place if we are to get anywhere. The Theatre does not anticipate a flowering tomorrow for its roots are buried deep in the past. But it is the bursting of fresh petals that we are after.

## THE IRISH NATIONAL THEATRE

A fine example is furnished to us by the Irish National Dramatic Society which, with the help of Miss Horniman made the Abbey Theatre possible. An old Theatre in Abbey Street was reconstructed at a cost of 13 thousand pounds and although it was small (seating only six hundred) it was a fitting companion to the Théâtre Libre of France and the Moscow Art Theatre. Although its stage technique always remained somewhat humdrum the Abbey triumphed by dint of superbly musical, simple, and singularly honest acting. It still holds with all its shortcomings, a good position in the theatre-world. No other twentieth century theatre has justified itself so much through its playwrights. The Abbey's roll call includes Synge, O'casey, Carrol, Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson. The

Abbey became, as Yeats wanted it to become, "a folk theatre," a playhouse of the people. It became that because a truly national movement could not ignore the masses, and its playwrights turned increasingly to the peasant drama because the peasantry was then the masses. Without entirely renouncing the afflatus of romanticism this drama became inevitably realistic. Romanticism was inherent in Irish nationalism and realism was enforced upon playwrights by peasant life, economic distress and other national problems.

## THE RUSSIAN THEATRE

The most arresting manifestation of the contemporary theatre is the drama of Soviet Russia.\* The drama of Red Russia has in the main continued the realistic tradition of Chekov and Gorki, drawing its material largely from the industrial development of the Plans, from the teeming life of the great cities, from the struggle of the peasant to wrest the subsistence from the soil. Typical of the pre-war period are "Bread" by Kirshon, dealing with the violence of class warfare, and "Squaring the Circle" by Kateyev. In all there is downright sincerity and enthusiasm.

"The Theatre in Russia," as J. B. Priestley points out, "is accepted as an important social institution, and is not regarded officially as a triviality, on the same level as greyhound racing or ball-room dancing." Most of the theatres with an established reputation are established by the State. The theatre is controlled by a director whose personality gives it its particular character. The directors and actors are carefully trained, have ample time for rehearsal and so long

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\* A valuable book recently out is 'The Theatre in Soviet Russia' by Von Maychem.

as they work conscientiously, may look forward to a reasonable security. There is enormous public enthusiasm for the theatre.

In present-day theatres, other than in Russia, the get rich-quick method is employed and the whole enterprise is given a rancid flavour. All the dignity and nobility of the ancient communal art is squeezed out. What was good enough for Sophocles or Kalidasa, Shakespearé or Shaw becomes "show business". "The theatre today", Priestley goes on to say "is regarded merely as an old-fashioned toy, so much light entertainment for the frivolous minded" And let us all say emphatically with Priestley once again: "Our present need of the compelling emotional power and the rigorous challenge of great theatre is very strong indeed. It cannot be doubted that the theatre if handled properly may leave the most satisfying impression upon the spectators." The peculiar form of communal response that it demands (to an incalculably higher degree than film or radio) is very important to our time and temperament. And since there is and has been in general a certain drift for many years in that direction it is well to ask about its organisation

Does the Soviet theatre furnish us with a good example for a National Theatre such as may suit our present purposes, in point specially of departmental organisation, training, employment of actors, and methods of production? Yes, it does in many ways as I shall endeavour to point out.

A dramatist today will work best if he is excited and inspired and not dictated to by the great social issues of our time.

## THE VILLAGE THEATRE\*

Tandra Devi, in a pamphlet on Village Theatres, made an impassioned plea for the Puppet Theatre and not that alone; she and her son, Patrick Poulds built a small Amateur Puppet Theatre in Kashmir. If this failed it was through lack of support, the absence of which is responsible, in so many cases, for the failure of selfless pursuits. She understood, the spirit of the village to the core. It is as though she saw the far future with the light of day. She is a visionary, true, but has not the rhetoric of a dreamer, for she was deeply moved by the light that had been robbed from the eyes of the poor. "Without beauty and vision," she says, "there is no life left in man to make bread, or to fight to live. How shall the poor of India get even bread, if life itself is denied them?" She believed, and how rightly, that nothing was destroying or could destroy India more, more than apathy, poverty, disease, than the want of self-expression and spontaneous creativity in its manifold manifestations. After food, health and hygiene comes group creation. Tandra Devi understands the village-mind well and she has expressed beautifully the crux of the problem.

"The theatre, comparatively impermanent, expresses the architecture of the soul and of nature—the buildings of mind and heart and hands—the dreams of the Gods and Angels—the voices of the ancestors and the unborn—the lovely and amazing intelligences and phantasmagoria of Creation—in fact, Religion as Drama."

I agree with Tandra Devi that to personalise art is to limit its power. In the mask and the marionette—

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\* Bharati Sarabhai has written a valuable Manifesto on the subject of a People's Theatre

the inanimate given life—there lies an almost equal fascination for the worker in the theatre of today and tomorrow.

Both involve a certain strange and enthralling sense of the mystic quality of the theatre, of art commanding life and life springing from art. They take a more natural place in these theatres where realistic illusion is of necessity banned. One can conceive of a drama of group-beings in which great individuals, around whom these groups coalesce, could be fitly presented only under the impersonal aspect of the mask; or a drama in which the foil to the mob is the marionette who is thought to give it utterance. One can conceive as easily the mask and the marionette finding an inevitable use in intimate symbolic drama or in the expression of the unconscious.

To-day there is the cult of the 'Star.' The ancients knew how to avoid this personalisation; for there was a certain awe in these masked figures which lend all the inspiration necessary to convey the desired spiritual effect. On "Ram Lila" and "Dussehara" days is still presented in the most primitive form the mighty Ravana

Once again to quote Tandra Devi, "The man who created a mask had to externalise a poet's vision—grave or gay, monstrous or seraphic. They educated the masses by the magic of their art. Masks were types and archetypes, invested with the dignity and power of a national feeling in tradition and in hallowed usage."

Tandra Devi also suggests that a great purpose could be served by this method, for it can prove primarily useful in the Educative and Propagandist

fields And I feel that it will be through poetry, memorable, verse such as Hafeez, Jullandhari and simple dramatic poetry in this sense, poetry that is Sufi Tabssum and Taseer can so well accomplish in Hindustani, that such results can best be achieved.

Uday Shankar has in a sense given a wonderful lead to this movement, for in the Shadow Play he has experimented with great effect. Chinese and Javanese shadow plays and puppets are very famous for their great beauty and artistry Anatole France said : 'The Marionette is august : it issues from a sanctuary.'

And Bernard Shaw says that the doll is in some ways a far more plastic instrument for dramatic expression than the human. Gordon Craig thinks the marionette can help to bring back religion as art—an art of revelation to the inspiration-starved people. Hardly a dozen people are involved in causing one theatre of this type to function. This is and should be meant primarily for the village. It is extraordinary what can be done with the Puppet. "Hamlet" was produced with puppets ; so was the "Blue Bird". So convinced was Craig with the inviolability of design that at one time he even wanted to banish the actor from the theatre as an unreliable agent easily disturbed by accidental factors like the emotions, the 'ideal and tentative solution' proposed by Craig was a 'super-marionette'

### **MRS. NORAH RICHARDS**

Another venture, primarily intended to teach dramatic art, was started by Mrs. Norah Richards at Andretta, Kangra Valley. Due to the comparative inaccessibility of the place nothing much came of this, moreover, since financial support was lacking,



such pioneering efforts, full of the best of intentions though they were, were doomed from the start

## **THE OPEN AIR THEATRE, LAHORE**

There are two Open Air Theatres in Lahore . one, of the people, for the people, by the people, in the Lawrence Gardens, than which a lovelier and more ideal site cannot be imagined ; the other in the Government College, Lahore. These were realised through the resourcefulness and pioneering efforts of Mr. G. D. Sondhi who as a producer and stage-designer has, for over a quarter of a century contributed in no small measure, to the Amateur Stage. Plays, ballets, dances and theatricals of every kind, of an amateur or professional nature, are frequently produced here. It has done and is doing very good work, for a stage effect can normally be produced with the simplest of stage property. The Open Air Theatre promotes the aim of teaching the people to live creatively in the open.

One cannot, however, see it as the future playhouse ; it can certainly be a part of the National Theatre scheme. Only a certain type of play can successfully be produced here. for its disadvantages are many . one is subject, among other things, to the gross inclemencies of weather and the vagaries of the seasons. By daylight the splash of colour in the audience is unbearably disillusioning. By night the theatre achieves nothing which cannot be achieved indoors, with lighting under more exact control, and the physical conditions much more effective.

## **EDUCATION AND PROGRESS**

In order to have fine drama we must also have a

fine audience. The quality of the drama depends very greatly upon sociological factors. A good play is really never lost in the world. Sooner or later it will have an audience. The Greeks were illiterate ; so were the Elizabethans ; yet they produced the greatest drama the world has known. Many of the blessings scientific progress has conferred were not only unknown to them but unanticipated. But in them was to be found a spirit which made them superior to mere education. They did not possess pieces of irrelevant information now possessed by so many of us, but they had an agility of mind which enabled them, not only to cope with but also to transcend, the difficulties we are not able to resolve. Education is an instrument, not a purpose in itself ; it will be well or ill-used according to the quality of those who possess it.

Longinus said : " It is not possible that men with mean and servile ideas and aims prevailing throughout their lives should produce anything that is admirable or worthy of immortality " When a nation is strong, mentally and spiritually it likes serious plays, tragedies and problem plays, when weak it demands light entertainment, comic plays, horseplay, trivialities. I am maintaining that the predominant drama is either one thing or the other according as the nation is spiritually strong or weak

When a nation's theatres are bankrupt and are almost exclusively occupied by trivial or sensational matter the nation is either in deep distress or mentally bankrupt. Laughter is all right upto a point but there is something demented about a people continually giggling. In the age of decadence buffoonery is preferred to learning and a clown can secure bread

when it is denied to a scholar. The purpose of the dramatist is to urge mankind to its high hope by reminding it of its high origin. Man came out of the imagination of Almighty God and can return to it. But if the poet will not remember his purpose, and insist that we are poor and impotent things, driven to a mean end by a cruel and unconscionable power which has neither name nor shape, need we be astonished to find that no heroes live in the world? Can we recover that true creative spirit, or are we become children of the machine in this age of utter chaos and confusion? A man does not march steadily from bad to good, better to best, for each generation has to begin anew the making of the world. Goethe said: "He only merits freedom as well as life, who daily conquers them anew." On the quality of each generation depends the quality it will make. The advantage which has accrued to several generations may be lost by one even though, it is more highly educated than were the predecessors. Life is like a chart of man's temperature, one day up, another day down, and unless we make a constructive effort to keep it healthy and normal a time will come, and it may never be far distant, when it will drop to zero and there will be no life left. The rise and fall of so many nations bear ample witness to this. Greece, Carthage, Rome, Babylon—all these rose and fell. Is any nation by Providence declared chosen at one time forever invulnerable?†

The rustic people like long plays about love and death and about all primal and primeval things. The townsmen like short, snappy, exotic, temporary and emotional things. When the rustic man speaks of

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\* Cf. Capek's 'R U R' and 'The Insect Play'.

† Cf. St. John Ervine 'The Theatre'

mystery he thinks of god. We speak of mystery with reference to thrillers and blood-curdlers.

Men who live in villages and earn their bread from the soil are made aware of the essential facts of life in a way that is not possible for men who live in cities. There is a completeness of existence in a village which is not to be found in a city. And these people of the village, knowing the regularity of nature, how she comes and goes by law, and the patience with which she performs her ordained ritual, bring into their lives an artistic expression, the deep and indescribable knowledge which comes to them through their own experience, which they have inherited from their fathers.

Why talk about a theatre, some people would assert, when there are no plays. Today, even if someone really wrote a play, (for plays are meant primarily to be heard and seen and not read, and everyone can't follow the Shavian technique and get away with it), he is likely to be denied all opportunity of seeing it performed. The difficulty of getting a play of distinction produced discourages many men of quality (those who are accomplished in the novel or short story technique) from continuing to practise this craft, hence the poverty of the play as compared to the novel. The theatre, I repeat, is essentially for the community and not for a clique; and whereas we have places in which to house the accumulated wisdom of the ages we have not a place in the community where the best drama of all time shall be freely witnessed by all who wish to see it performed. We must have a National Theatre. And we must want it like the people of Moscow. They need it, it is a part of their

souls. And behind the footlights, an attitude remains among the artists which is an assurance against a triumph of forces which could harm the stage. For it is believed by them that the theatre is an ennobling institution, that it is not a quick and flashy way to make money and gain publicity, that its participants must serve with humility the needs of their fellow men whether the needs be to laugh or cry, to be defied or to be inspired. The simple Indian is, like the simple Russian, infected with the passion for spectacles.

The more the spectacle excites and captivates the soul, the more it attracts him. The simple Russian spectator loves a drama at which he can weep a little, philosophise about life, listen to words of wisdom, more than any noisy vaudeville act after which nothing is left to feed the soul.

## **DRAMA : EMOTIONAL NOURISHMENT**

A real People's Theatre exists in Russia. It has served many functions during these strenuous years. It has allowed hungry men and women to forget that they have nothing to eat ; it has given them glimpses of future happiness ; it has encouraged and excited them ; it has relaxed them and made them laugh, it has given them brightness and colour when all about was drab and bleak, it has given them confidence and hope ; it has helped to give them an education, has opened up a host of art treasures which the world has as its common heritage. The theatre is fulfilling a demand. It can do here exactly what it is doing in Russia but here as yet the public cannot clamour for it. There cannot be clamour for a thing like this because people think it does not possess a serious pur-

pose. There are people who are consistently incapable of enjoying any plan ; but the theatre was, until it had to suffer the rivalry of the cinema, more than any place of entertainment, a microcosm of the community.

Gibbon informs us that Rome, at its decline, had reached a point when the Romans could not see a tragedy or any serious play but preferred instead to witness ingenious spectacles of bloodshed and other sanguinary sights. The empire was reeling to its ruin. Thomas Hardy, in his preface to the 'Dynasts', asked whether our meditative world, 'unhappily perplexed by riddles of death Thebes never knew' was capable of drama. One might ask a similar question, and very pertinently today, when riddles of death Thebes never knew seem to be all but lost in the practical riddle of our society and civilisation.

At all events it is not great themes of drama that are lacking in this country. The thing lacking is a popular response to great themes. One sees this on the amateur stage too often. Playwright and audience thus seem to be caught up, whenever plays are produced, in a vicious circle. The theatre and audience is ourselves and in the mass there may be no health or hope in us. How then is the playwright to break through? The theatre is, and needs to be, also a way of escape, serious drama is only one kind of drama and it would be a folly to demand a crop of superior plays as the price of the regeneration of the theatre. But if the Indian theatre is to have a survival (or a renaissance) playwrights will have inevitably to discover something more of the community in which they live, move and have their being. For although it is no doubt true that the theatre is always

‘decaying,’ in this case well nigh gasping for breath, decay weaves a prophetic look in the social and political chaos of our generation, and perhaps only in holding up a mirror to our society is there hope of stopping the rot. If poets can restore poetry to the stage, well and good. If what is called the propaganda play can possess itself of the specific appeal of drama, it is to be welcomed. Four types of play are needed for the theatre : the decorative, and ornamental type ; the puppet theatre ; the medieval ritualism and devotionism of the village theatre ; and lastly, the drama that is sociological and somewhat propagandist in nature. What plays will eventually come about will be determined by the playwright of genius. A man of genius is at once a sign of his own greatness and a sign of his nation’s greatness ; he is the expression both of a unique personality and of a noble race. But there can be no renewed impulse of playwrights without a theatre.

## A NATIONAL THEATRE

### WANTED : A NON-COMMERCIAL THEATRE

This is a plea for a Theatre owned by the community. The National Theatre implies the idea of social service without acquisitive gain.\* It must be endowed to a great extent so that it may function in freedom from the rigours which always attend a commercial stage enterprise. A play is evanescent, gone with the wind even as the actors speak the lines. To subsidise the theatre is to receive no concrete return ; and it is obvious that the amount required will have to be large enough to cope with and withstand the losses that shall have to be suffered during its initial, experimental period.

The enterprise will have to be on a large scale, for this, short of extravagance or ostentation, has a far greater chance of succeeding in a permanent and honourable position, than any enterprise on a small scale, however ably conducted. It must impose on public notice by the very fact of its simple, dignified and liberal existence. It must bulk large in the social and intellectual life of the country. It must not be mistaken for those pioneer theatres known as Group Theatres. The group, the ridiculous clique, of which we have in Bombay, Calcutta, Lahore, and all big cities a fair sprinkling, is bad ; it is intelligent and serious, but uncritical, often super-reverential.

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\*Cf Granville Barker "A National Theatre "



A National Theatre will restore to the plays the sense of high vocation of which they do not even know the existence. No one will deny that the first efforts of a National Theatre will be of necessity experimental, even crude. We will stamp our National Theatre with the form of a human and spiritual idea. For the drama is at its best, and at its worst too, indeed the expression of spirit. But the stage will also display whatever health there will be, whatever valour of soul, whatever things of loveliness and good report, that remain to give free scope to the spirit in its secret but permeating life. This is not too idealistic, for let us remember from what our theatre is derived. Its ethics were lofty. Every play is in a sense a sacrament, and, short of the rites of religious worship one can imagine no artistic activity more worthy of a proper home for its practice and consumption? That is why no expense should be spared, no method left untried, to make our National Theatre as beautiful and as technically perfect as conditions require and as it lies within our power. The Russians lavish their best efforts, and how rightly, upon those things which benefit not a small select number but people in general. Witness, the Moscow underground

The Theatre I visualise should, apart from its exterior loveliness be in harmony with the atmosphere of the Province and the people, have all the normal requirements of any theatre in London or Moscow.

The auditorium should have a capacity of 1,000 or 1,200 seats. And the community element should be stressed by the horse-shoe formation which more than any other knits the members of the audience one with another and with the actors on the stage. And the

stage must be equipped with every useful device which modern ingenuity can supply. The building will have to include an excellent library and reading rooms, two rehearsal rooms, a wardrobe room, a dramatic school room, a make-up room, a carpenter's room, an artists' room, a Manager's room, a producer's room, a Committee room, a lounge, a foyer, and close on a dozen other rooms

Who will finance this great scheme? Government? No, we must look for private liberality. This is not only preferable but desirable also. There is no profit involved. The donor will make a gift to the people, in point of service value of no less magnitude than any hospital or school or college. There are so many self-effacing philanthropists in India who can give donations for a theatre if they are made to realise its National value. No fabulous wealth is required for this essential public service. It would be ideal if this theatre could be born out of the munificence of one man, but if two or three or more joined to cause this to be realised our indebtedness to them would not diminish one jot.

In which part of India will this National Theatre be built? And will there only be one theatre? And even if there could be one in every province would that be too Utopian, too unrealisable a dream? There are seven hundred and ninety theatres in USSR. It would not be very incredible if there were seven in India. We have first of all to make a start and in which capital city the first will be built will depend upon the donor, this would no doubt be his special prerogative

It will have to be admitted that the spot chosen for

the erection of this building will be central, near a park and with some, if not extensive, grounds. For the purpose it has to serve is no mean one and it is necessary that the producer and the actors live under the best conditions possible so that for the most strenuous task ahead of them they may derive the maximum benefit.

## THE BOARD

This mighty power-house of dramatic energy will be directed by a Board of Trustees or Governors among whom doubtless, if he chooses so to honour it and his interest lies that way, we will name the Donor. None of them can or will have, it need hardly be mentioned, any material interest. The Board will manage the finances and see to the general welfare of the theatre. The Director or *regisseur* must be an autocrat. His business will be to dominate, synthesise, and unify each production and this to bring forth a single work of theatrical art instead of an histrionic accident. A single mind is needed to shape the performance, set its character, give it its pace, provide its atmosphere, scenery and lights. Aeschylus was the first important playwright, stage director, stage designer, costumer, and dancing master: a veritable O'Neil, Reinhardt, Edmond Jones, Diughelev, rolled in one. He is the answer to Gordon Craig's prayer twenty-four centuries before Craig called for supermen in the theatre. One cannot imagine such a producer but we must look for such a one as combines in one person as many features of dramatic art and technique as possible. It is obvious that the *regisseur* will be a well paid man. His salary should not be

less than Rs. 1,000 a month. The Director must have time and leisure and the actors must spend a considerable time over rehearsals. No slipshod productions will be the order of the day. Meticulousness in the preparation of a production, even if this requires months of rehearsal, will be the first principle.

The Russians (Stanislowski's followers) insisted upon "the necessity of the death of the *regisseur* in the actor's creativeness." The secret of the Moscow Art Theatre's mastery of theatre lay in the discovery of an essential principle, namely, the ability of the actor to submerge his individuality in his role. Acting must follow the law of inner justification and the actor must create his role as if it were at one with his personality. The Stanislowski system had ten cardinal points in the actor's preparation. To what extent some of these points can be found useful will be determined first by the type of play that is to be produced and in what manner. But one thing is certain that the traditional style which exists today—I mean the ranting, gesticulating without much thought for the truth or sincerity of the action, must go. In this present style a fine voice and magnificent windmill gesturing are of more importance than the actual content of the speech. Hamlet's advice to players may be here recalled

From the player who "out Herod's," the robustious periwig pated fellow, tearing a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ear of the groundlings;" from him to the actors who 'in the very torrent, tempest, and I might say, the very whirlwind of passion acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness,' and who 'speak speech 'trippingly on the tongue'

... and the actors have moreover, 'strutted and bellowed, that I would have thought some nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so badly.' The ideal of the actor is quite clear before us. We know that we must reflect nature, the life that we see around us, but we know too that naturalism is not enough. Naturalism must be guided and controlled by an artistic conscience.

The National Theatre will have a well paid regular staff of about thirty men and women with a benefit of Provident Fund. These, once a selection has been made with the help of a select committee, will be put under strict training and discipline.

A set of trained teachers in various subjects will give them due instruction in all the various branches of learning, from voice training and physical exercise to a knowledge of history and geography. Only after they have passed a regular test will they be fit enough to become the regular actors of the National Theatre. They will receive salaries at the rate of . 250—25—600. Senior actors at a later stage may even receive more. By this method there will be no inducement for them to accept higher salaries at the Film companies, for the advantages they would get in so worthy a cause and the prestige they obtain will immeasurably make up for any monetary benefits that may accrue to them in the very hazardous affairs of the film world. In Moscow the artists are regarded as 'the darlings of the Government.' When others were starving artists were given subsistence. The U.S.S.R. has never subscribed to the theory that genius flourishes in a garret. We require in India

exactly what the Russians have in their country : social spirit and principle. Stalin once said that the writers are 'the engineers of the soul.' The actors try to live up to this. Actors in this country are still held in social obloquy. Society may like a glamorous few because of their outer ways and treat a few as curiosities. The National Theatre will cause the profession of the actor to be admired and looked up to. Perhaps we too may be able to confer on him the title of 'Peoples' Artist.' I am not sure if it will not be better for a certain anonymity to be observed; in an age of publicity selfless art counts far more than self-assertion. It is to the actor and no one else that the theatre belongs. This does not mean the professional actor, but the actor as poet, as director, musician, stage designer, and certainly not the least of all the actor as spectator, for the contribution of the spectator is almost as important as the cast. The audience must take part in the play if we are ever to see rising a true art of the theatre, the oldest, most powerful, and the most immediate of arts, combining the many in one.

The work of the actor must be of such a nature and so many facilities should be given him that his work should become a pleasure. Men and women will receive equal salaries and it should be noted that they must be well paid. It must be remembered that they are the servants of the people, highly skilled and sensitive to the slightest tremor and vibrating with ecstasy. What Tolstoy said about art applies to acting no less. Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by those feelings, and also

experience them Is it not natural that like a violin, an actor is a most delicate instrument, nervous and highly strung? For such a temperament, and for its proper functioning, the best conditions are needful. It must be recognised that an entirely new form of acting is needed for the present generation, the stock system has died out. We are now in a transition stage and not settled down to a fixed system of re-organisation. What exactly this will be is to be determined by experimentation and to be decided by the principles laid down by the Dramatic School.

One thing is certain. Whatever be the rules and principles then laid down, concentration, memory of emotion, dramatic action, characterisation, observation, and rhythm must be among the things emphasised. Education will consist principally of three parts: first, the education of the body, the physical apparatus, of every muscle and sinew. Exercises will be in gymnastics, dancing (interpretative and classical), voice control, make-up, diction. Secondly: educational history. (especially of drama), acting, stage-work, lighting. Thirdly, education of the soul: an actor must have complete possession of the following faculties: senses in various imaginable situations, development of memory of feeling, memory of inspiration or penetration, and visual memory.

The theatre is important and is a mystery, a mystery in which are wedded together two eternal phenomena, the dream of perfection and the dream of the eternal.

## EQUIPMENT

The Theatre must have the best lighting arrangements possible and the most modern equipment should

be obtained, regardless of cost. The function of lighting is to stimulate the imagination. The beauty and imagination of this branch of interpretative art lies in the fact that there are no limitations, no scientific rules. It is a field where the pioneer and experimenter will reap his reward in the beauty of creation.

It will be clear from what I have briefly indicated that the National Theatre should be distinguished, have a style and form worthy of the best traditions of the country, artistic, and in every feature symbolic of universal art. Since it is to be a repository of human wisdom, fleeting and passing though it be, its portals shall in time be hallowed, for in its chambers shall have resounded the resonant voices of India's most cultured men

## LANGUAGE AND THE WORD 'NATIONAL'

It is not to be understood that a simple language shall be the one that can dominate the stage. The language problem is something people have made much of. The wealth of literature and the peculiarities and niceties of language it is possible only to enjoy in a language that is one's own. "The Soviet Theatre," says Professor I. Moskwin, "is not associated strictly with the Russian language or even the eleven languages of the eleven union republics. More than forty languages are spoken on the Soviet stage. The fact that it is multi-national is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Soviet Theatre."<sup>\*</sup>

And so to suggest a single language for the National Theatre is to limit its scope, to deny to it the essential universality which is implicit in the word 'national'

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<sup>\*</sup> *U.S.S.R. Speaks for itself*



All tongues and epochs are to be deliberately intermingled, gathered together round one rallying point, the National Theatre. There is something all-embracing in its meaning. For the theatre can be national only when the spirit of each language is brought out to the full, when each is raised to its full stature and there is one purpose behind all endeavour: 'it is immortality to die aspiring.' It is only natural that plays will mostly be produced in the vernacular, for else the purpose is ill served. There will, however, be no bar to plays being produced in English or even written in English, for there is, and always will be a bi-lingual, even tri-lingual audience, and it is not the purpose of the National Theatre to ignore the minority. Moreover, in all capital cities original plays in English will be produced from time to time, though it cannot become a regular feature in the scheme of the repertoire.

## **PUPPET AND VILLAGE THEATRES**

How, it may next be asked, is the problem of the villages to be solved? Are only the cities to have a theatre and the villages, where the contact with real life is more real and vital, to be ignored? Not at all. It is their problems that shall be uppermost in the mind of the National Theatre and to cater for them will be its prime function. Alongside with the progress the main theatre will be making the village theatres will be going apace; first one, then others. These will be, in the main, and to begin with repertoire companies, some Puppet Theatres, some catering exclusively for children, and others which suit the time and temper of the villages. These will play a very

great part in the education of the rising generation.

It would naturally be better if permanent theatrical companies for such purposes be formed, very much in the manner of the National Theatre. For otherwise "there will be no scientific art but only an aspiration towards it." It will be the mission of this art to reflect, without bias, the wide outlook, the unified ideology. This will require a deep insight into human psychology, emotional power and monumental form. Artists will not be reduced to one level but it will be their purpose to give expression to their creative individuality. Periodically, festivals will be arranged when more than one touring company shall assemble to give the people a feast of music, spectacle, song and drama, puppet shows, mystery and morality plays, very much after their own heart even as their mood prompts. The form does not really change, it is the tone, the value, the outlook. As Bernard Shaw puts it: 'it is the philosophy that changes, not the craft of the playwright'

## PROPAGANDA

In general we must have a Propaganda Theatre not far removed from the Soviet Theatre, the transformation of which lay in the hands of the great producer, Maierhold. In a country like ours where so many millions are illiterate the drama is the best way to familiarise them with the set of ideas that are to be emphasised in keeping, very naturally, with the genius of the people. It is a canon of Marxist dogma that there is no such thing existing as absolutely uninfluenced or impartial opinion. Generally speaking, this assumption is true. Lest I

be misunderstood I wish to point out that I am not referring to a psychology which, from recent experience, we have begun to label as 'war-time.' For it is only natural that during such a crisis as we are passing through our values are but naturally disproportionately arranged. We tend, even against our better judgment, to believe the worst of those in opposition.

And this resentment grows by what it feeds on. 'Obliterate indignation,' says Roger Dateller, 'resentment, a thorough going sense of justice, and you will obliterate the Propaganda Play'. It may be said that objection is usually directed not so much for the presence of a moral in a work of art as at the obstructiveness of it. Propaganda plays, dealing seriously with controversial subjects will not be criticised if the problems are expressed in dramatic terms. It often happens, however, that the dramatist is so stirred with indignation over an abuse that the artist is for the time being lost in the preacher, and the play turns into a sermon or a tract. Such a one needs to be reminded that the theatre does not exist primarily for the airing of grievances or the settlement of problems, but for the creations of things of beauty that shall satisfy the aspirations of man. By dramatic form alone are certain lessons, like peace, concord, humaneness to be inculcated, especially when this medium is at the disposal of enlightened people. It is, no doubt, to be admitted that this form presents a narrow outlook; one is likely to fall for an abstraction, idea, and be guided, not by inward vision, but by drawing too near to mankind. But so much depends upon our attitude, and I consider it will be up to our playwrights, for our aim must be clear, to emphasise Human love and know

it to be our supreme need in this world. 'The loss of love alone,' says Wilson Knight, in 'The Wheel of Fire,' 'is responsible for all the ills that flesh endures.' All these rules apply to the brilliant and talented and not to the writer of genius ; for he is a law unto himself and he will give only that which 'freshly springs from his soul.'

## THE CHILDREN'S THEATRE

The Children's Theatre is very important. There are 131 Children's Theatres in Russia, half of them puppet theatres.

I do not for the moment (though this will no doubt come) suggest that a separate Children's Theatre will be built, but for these 'Flowers of Life,' (so children are called in Russia), as much loving care and attention as is lavished will help to produce the garden of the most perfumed flowers. Tagore, understood the child mind and in 'The Crescent Moon,' one of the loveliest child-poems ever written, he says: "Then crowds of flowers came out all of a sudden, from no one knows where, and danced upon the grass in wild glee." Nothing much can be done for children with all our goodwill, unless teachers and the dramatists alike undergo a complete training equipping them for the most needful task in the world, the training of the future generation. The Soviet school is the most dynamic in the world for it turns out students fully equipped to tackle every problem. This is witnessed in other theatres. There should be no difficulty, I think, after the war, in sending suitable persons to study at first hand the condi-

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\* Cf *Salute the Soviet* by Mrs C Chesterton, *Mother Russia* by M Hindus and *U.S.S.R speaks for Itself*

tions in Russian Schools, State Children's Theatres, and the various branches of the Moscow Art Theatre. We will find that we have much to learn from them and their constantly changing experiments, and with a flexible method such as theirs we can, with profit, introduce a number of ideas into our scheme of things. Until such a time as propitious circumstances render possible a visit to the U.S.S.R. the best available books should be studied. The Children's Theatre is most indebted to Henriette Pascar and Natalie Katz for their efforts to make such a thing possible.

The programmes of the theatres consist mostly of the performance of fairy tales, Hans Anderson and Grimm being constantly made use of. Criticism is encouraged and the children's enthusiasm is unbounded. Children are their own critics, and if they are present as a school unit at a performance, they are encouraged to write their own thoughts and suggestions the next day in school.

Always there are new devices, experiments, new interpretations; staleness is non-existent. Constructed from our own legends or those we have grown up on, the Stories of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Arabian Nights, Hitopdesha, numerous fairy tales which are household words should form the basis of our dramas for the little ones. It is essential that the children react to every incident in the play; the audience has to be at one with the actors. The children to be catered for are between the ages of seven and thirteen. The plays are normally about the hero and his adventures. The live puppet, who is usually the hero, soon earns the affections of the audience, who are thrilled with his antics, jokes and escapades. Even if at the

beginning a theatre cannot be built separately for the children some days may be left over and each Sunday, performances specially meant for them, preferably of puppets, should be given. Let them feel, on those days, that the theatre belongs to them, and let them romp in the foyer, the corridors, the buffet to their hearts' content. It would also be a good idea if they were, as in Russia, entertained at the beginning with songs and dances, sometimes with short dialogues between two characters. A staff of pedagogues to answer various questions the children are curious about in the play should be present and it will be their job to note down all of the reactions in the audience to the various situations.

From these notes a chart should be made to guide them for their future work. In every interval they could be taught mass games and songs. It is to be remembered that these theatricals may not often pay their way because the admission will not be priced high, but no expense must be spared to make the productions real works of art and it is the business of the people whose children will benefit from this that the deficit is willingly covered should funds run low.

## FUNCTIONS

"To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

This simple quotation explains the function of the Theatre better than the most fulsome array of theories which were ever set out to combat the inevitable criticism of propaganda in art.

In order that the right type of plays be produced some encouragement in a practical form must be given to playwrights. Properly to achieve this a Board of Selection should be appointed. This should comprise of two people, critics of high excellence, in each language. These will decide whether the play presented for purposes of production is of the right type, of quality worthy to be presented and in keeping with the high standard in view. In order to create a truly, and no doubt worthy, competitive spirit prizes for the best plays on almost any subject will be offered. It is true that the dramatists will be given rewards for their work but they shall give them freedom in their own line of business to carve and paint as they wish to do. It may be said that 'he who plays the piper calls the tune'; but he has no right to go as far as to tell the piper how to play. It is not possible here, for it is outside the scope of this book, to outline the precise nature of the details to be observed by the Board in the selection of plays; but one thing shall have to be guarded against. Everything that fails to promote harmony shall be weeded out. A positive attitude should be adopted: faith in human love and the wisdom of human institutions. If today, as in previous times, we face the world with theological prejudice, we have the choice between two moods. Either human nature is vile, and the world may be left to wallow in racial hatreds or we retain our faith in human dignity, strive to create law out of anarchy, and turn hatred, wherever it is, into love. Perhaps we may also be able to say good-bye to the baneful fetish of gold for the realisation of the prophesy of Burns:

5:206 4-11  
It's comin' yet, for a' that,  
That man to man the world o'er  
Shall brothers be for a' that !

The National Theatre has a purpose—it must always be remembered, and that is to defend culture. Culture, it has been said is the first casualty in war and the last to recover from its wounds. Not so in the U.S.S.R. In war-tempest tossed Russia the artists are specially safeguarded and I have it on the authority of the great Russian artist, Sevtoslav Roerich, that no artist, philosopher, or poet of repute, is asked, even allowed, to enlist in the fighting forces; for each is a soldier in the battle for the preservation of culture, and so serves his country best.

Herbert Read says: 'Art is a part of culture; it can only develop in a favourable climate of social amenities and cultural aspirations.' We are to see to it, and the writer too that social amenities should increase. 'The triumph of culture' said Emerson, 'is to overpower nationality' And one may add, "the triumph of nationalism to overpower culture," for one's own literature is stimulated by that of other countries. We are to seek stimulus from them. We are to be ennobled and the National Theatre should, and no doubt will, (through economic security and educational opportunity) share in the cultural heritage to the utmost of their potentiality

## DRAMA PRIZES

The only way in which real plays can be had is first and foremost, as in Russia to introduce Drama Prizes for the plays of highest excellence. In 1940 a number of Stalin Prizes were awarded ranging from a hundred



thousand to fifty thousand roubles each and these were then styled 'Laureates of Stalin Award.' Amongst the dramatists who won these prizes were Trennev, Korneichuk, and Podogin for 'The Man with the Gun', and Sholvyov for 'Field Marshal Kutozov (1940)'. Amongst the best dramatists now writing are Trennev and Count Alexei Tolstoy whose version of Pinnochio was well received. It is not easy to have good dramatists unless these people have thoroughly understood the theatre and its technique.

Good dialogue is hard to get by; it is usually so stilted and unnatural. Gordon Macleod has rightly understood the problem, for he says: "Good plays are seldom written by outsiders. Most of the great dramatists of the world have been men of the theatre, generally actors." Of course, a plan similar to that which exists in Russia may be employed, it seems to me, with great effect once the plan of the National Theatre materialises. First a script of a scenario is presented, then discussed by the Committee and criticised. This is then taken up by the author and written and often subjected to revision and modification during rehearsals. This method has many faults and many authors will rightly feel annoyed by the limits this method puts on them but this is merely a suggestion and need not be accepted literally on face value. In some cases, at any rate, it were best to try these methods. In India particularly where dramatic performances are so few some effective means whereby dramatists may be made fully to understand theatrical technique should be devised, for it must never be forgotten that words are the soul of a play.

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\* *The Soviet Theatre* by Gordon Macleod, 1943

There must be a new attitude towards our Classics, something vital and new ; ' to be able to look back and comprehend all cultures, able to look forward and plan for the future, because they can examine the present with unprejudiced eye... making our own culture by the virtue of our own lives '

In historical plays of the past, in plays already written and in plays that come to be written, a frank and critical attitude to the figures that have gone must be made, that now and hereafter no lingering fear of lurking gloom may obscure the picture of the many, either by a hovering mist or with haloed brightness.

## A PRACTICAL SCHEME

There never was, and never will be, an ideal theatre ; at the most one approximating to it The theatre is too complex and delicate a machine, depending on the harmonious co-operation of too many talents and influences ever to reach perfection for more than passing moments The very greatest theatres, at the height of their greatness, were criticised, not as a rule without reason We should not let our craving for what is ideally desirable render ourselves careless of what is practically desirable as an improvement upon existing conditions It is by no means a magical formula that is being offered, no instant and miraculous cure for all the ills and failures of our theatreless life, but merely a plan for an institution which, being based on sound and artistic principles, may develop far beyond immediate possibilities and probabilities, and may give a healthy impetus to theatrical progress throughout the world

That there are, and always will be, difficulties, it

needs hardly be gainsaid. The main difficulty lies, not so much in any external condition, but in the general present intellectual attitude, supremely sceptical, which views with instinctive shrinking anything that savours of idealism.

The instinct of such people, dampers of ardour and enthusiasm, is to suggest and exaggerate difficulties instead of resolving to overcome them. Or they will advise with a benignant smile and shrug of the shoulder that such a venture will not succeed. But these people do not seem to realise that the insuperable difficulty lies in their own infirmity of purpose. But I shall conclude with a note of hope, of *nil desperandum*—never despair, for people will not fail to realise the importance of Bernard Shaw's remarks that "a National Theatre is worth having for the sake of the National Soul."





